



IRON GAME HISTORY



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THE KONO LEGACY

During this past holiday season a large shipment of large boxes was delivered to the Stark Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Some of the boxes weighed over a hundred pounds and they contained material assembled over the long life of Tommy Kono—one of the Iron Game's most legendary athletes. Almost immediately we began to unpack the boxes and sort the contents into appropriate categories in preparation for the long and time-consuming task of hav-

ing the contents systematically archived so they can be used in the future by fans as well as academic researchers. During this process, Jan Todd, who directs the Ph.D. Program in Physical Culture and Sport Studies here at UT, said she believed the Kono Collection contained enough



Weightlifting legends as well as fast friends and fellow Hawaiians for more than 60 years, Tommy Kono (left) and Pete George (right) share a 375-pound barbell as well as a laugh, as they perform a rare two-man clean and jerk.

material for a number of doctoral dissertations during the coming years.

Shortly after the Kono Collection arrived on campus, we decided to share the wonderful news with the readers of Joe Roark's *Iron History* internet forum. Accordingly, I sent the following announcement to Roark and told him to feel free to share the news with his readers.

The Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports

just received a unique and wonderful addition—the Tommy Kono Collection, which came in over 40 boxes and weighed well over a ton. As some of you may have known, Tommy assembled over

his long life a large and eclectic collection of materials relating primarily to weightlifting. Besides being an incomparable lifter, Tommy was a saver, and his collection contains books, magazines, photographs, films, videotapes, awards and medals, including the dozens he won from the early years, small ones up to and including his Olympic trove and his Mr. Universe trophies. Tommy also collected artifacts of all sorts, perhaps the most valuable of which, from a research

perspective, is his remarkable, detailed series of training logs covering most of his dominant years. These book-like logs list every rep, set, and workout he did, along with such information as what he ate, how he felt, who he saw, and much more; they even contain comments which make Tommy and his time come to life again. These logs are in a way like books of the sort Ernest Hemingway referred to when he wrote, "All the good books are alike in that they are truer than

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if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that it all had happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.

The primary architect of this matchless gift is another lifting legend, Dr. Pete George, who has been a subscriber to *Iron Game History* since our first issue was published in 1990, when he became a Patron. It should be added that Pete's own accomplishments on the platform are very little, if at all, below those of Kono, his fellow Hawaiian and long-time friend.

Following the end of his competitive lifting career, Tommy did not fade away from the Iron Game. He served as coach of the Mexican national weightlifting team for four years before the 1968 Games in Mexico City and then worked with the West German team for another four years before the Munich Games in 1972. He was then named head coach of the 1976 US Olympic Weightlifting Team that competed in Montreal. After 1976, he supported himself by giving clinics and taking a job with the Honolulu Parks and Recreation Department, where he quickly rose in rank. He also continued to attend major lifting meets, to serve as an official, to offer advice to young lifters, and to stay in touch with other celebrities in the worlds of sports and popular culture. There was even a documentary film made about him called *Arnold Knows Me*. The title of the film referred to a question the director of the film asked Tommy after having seen a signed photograph of Arnold on the wall in the Kono home. "Do you know Arnold?" he asked Kono, to which Tommy answered with a smile, saying, "Arnold Knows Me"—a reference to his long friendship with Schwarzenegger, who often spoke about how, when he was only a 13-year-old boy in Austria, he saw Tommy Kono lift in the World Championships in Vienna and decided that he wanted to be a weightlifter just like Tommy Kono.

Although Pete was managing his thriving dental practice in Honolulu and Tommy was increasingly busy at his job for the city's Parks and Recreation Department, the two men and their families remained very close and saw each other often. After Tommy became ill, Pete visited frequently and the Kono family sought Pete's counsel about what should be done with his collection of papers

and memorabilia. The Konos wanted to make sure that Tommy's legacy would be protected and his materials would be cared for and made available to weightlifting fans and scholars alike. And so, with encouragement from Pete, the decision was made to donate the collection to the Stark Center so it could be preserved for posterity.

Following his death last April, we have had numerous conversations with Pete George and members of the Kono family about the transfer of the collection to The University of Texas at Austin. As we thought more about Tommy's multi-faceted life and many contributions to the Iron Game we decided, even before we knew the collection was coming to the Stark Center, to produce a special issue of *IGH* focused primarily on Kono—as we did in 2000 when we honored the late John Grimek.

Accordingly, we asked John Fair—who has spent the spring semester with at the center for the last six years and also taught a physical culture class for the past three years—to help us with the creation of such a special issue. John agreed to write the lead article about Kono and to solicit other articles about him. John also agreed to go to Honolulu and oversee the sorting of the collection and—with days of help from his wife, Sarah; as well as assistance from Pete and members of the Kono family—the packing of the collection.

Our belief is that the more a person knows about the sport of weightlifting, the more he/she will understand how unendingly grateful we are to the Kono family for entrusting us with Tommy's collection, and how fully committed we are to preserving his memory and sharing with the wider world his singular contributions to the strength sports. We've already made a decision to add him to our Wall of Icons, which includes such legends as Eugen Sandow, John Grimek, John Davis, and Kati Sandwina. And, once we fully unpack and archive Tommy's priceless collection, we're going to mount a display devoted to him and his lifting cohorts—men like Schemansky, John Davis, and Pete George—who ruled the world during the Golden Age of American Weightlifting.

Over our 34 years at the University of Texas Jan and I have been fortunate to have been trusted with many significant collections from giants of The Game. Beyond question, the Tommy Kono Collection ranks among the most exceptional, and we are deeply grateful to the wonderful Kono family and to Pete George for helping it make its way to the Stark Center, where it will always be among friends.

—Terry Todd